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ABSTRACT

Ten annotations of literature in the ERIC system that discuss the pros and cons of grade retention for low-achieving students are presented in this booklet. (Author/MLF)

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ERIC

Number 43, February 1979

The Best of ERIC presents annotations of ERIC literature on important topics in educational management.

The selections are intended to give educators easy access to the most significant and useful information available from ERIC. Because of space limitations, the items listed should be viewed as representative, rather than exhaustive, of literature meeting those criteria.

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Student Retention vs. Social Promotion

1 **Bocks, William M.** "Non-promotion: 'A Year to Grow?' " *Educational Leadership,* 34, 5 (February 1977), pp. 379-83. EJ 155 099.

The assumption that grade retention provides children "a year to grow" led schools to fail over one million elementary children in 1971. But this assumption, Bocks argues, is a false one based on ignorance of the research evidence. His review of the evidence counters the common arguments in support of nonpromotion and reveals its "devastating consequences" for children. Although he offers little critical analysis of the research and occasionally differs with Jackson (see number 4), he gives a concise and forceful summary of the research findings.

The evidence clearly shows, Bocks concludes, that nonpromotion brings no benefit to children and often brings harm. It fails to ensure greater achievement. The majority of students who repeat a grade achieve no better the second time, and many do worse. Nonpromotion only worsens students' social problems. The threat of nonpromotion does not enhance motivation. And nonpromotion policies fail to decrease the range of student abilities with which teachers must cope.

This evidence and our concern for children, Bocks continues, demand that we respond to student problems by adjusting our classrooms to meet the needs of all students. It is not possible to prepare all students equally for a given grade, and teachers must accordingly individualize instruction to accommodate students' diverse needs.

Administrators have a role to play as well. Lack of knowledge and fear of failure keep many teachers from individualizing instruction. Administrators can help by providing teachers with opportunities to learn the skills of individualized instruction and a safe environment in which to practice it.

2 **Caplan, Paula J.** "The Role of Classroom Conduct in the Promotion and Retention of Elementary School Children." *Journal of Experimental Education,* 41, 3 (Spring 1973), pp. 8-11. EJ 082 200.

Far more boys than girls are identified as problem learners, Caplan reports, and it seems that conduct and sexual norms influence this identification. Her study sought to examine the influence of behavior and sexual norms on decisions to promote and retain students. Caplan matched fifty promoted and retained primary students according to age, sex, race, and grades. Forty were boys and only ten girls, reflecting the ratio at which boys and girls are retained. She found that the promoted girls received significantly higher behavior ratings than did the retained girls and that the mean behavior rating for the retained girls was lower than that for the boys. The two groups of boys evidenced no behavioral difference.

Caplan concluded that girls' classroom conduct seems to be a critical consideration in their promotion and retention. She adds that aggressiveness among girls attracts special attention because it counters sexual norms. Girls' behavior may affect teachers' judgments in this way: aggressiveness may lead teachers to underestimate girls' abilities, while conformity, the expected behavior, may lead teachers to neglect their learning problems.

This study unfortunately used a very small sample and provides only limited data, but it does suggest problems that demand further consideration.

3 **Finlayson, Harry J.** "Nonpromotion and Self-Concept Development." *Phi Delta Kappan,* 59, 3 (November 1977), pp. 205-6. EJ 167 843.

The stricter standards of the back-to-basics and competency-based education movements may pose a dilemma, according to Finlayson. The new standards may force more failure, and failure may damage students' self-esteem and future achievement.

Although past studies have associated nonpromotion with poor self-concept, he notes, they have failed to determine "whether a poor self-concept contributes to school failure or whether school failure contributes to a poor self-concept." In response to this problem, he conducted a two-year study of retention and self-concept, using data collected on first graders at the outset of schooling and through their second year. His study compared the self-concepts of seventy-five regularly promoted students, nonpromoted students, and promoted borderline students showing the same characteristics as the nonpromoted students.

He found to his surprise that nonpromotion did not create self-

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concept problems. The self-concept scores for all three groups rose during the first year. During the second year, "the *nonpromoted* group of pupils continued to increase their self-concept scores significantly, while scores of the *borderline* and *promoted* groups dropped slightly, but not significantly." The self-concept scores of the nonpromoted students were matched by the judgments of parents and teachers, who felt that the retention was not harmful and most often beneficial for the students.

More research on schooling and self-concept may be necessary, Finlayson concludes, but nonpromotion appears not to hurt the self-concepts of at least very young students.

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4 **Jackson, Gregg B.** "The Research Evidence on the Effects of Grade Retention." *Review of Educational Research*, 45, 4 (Fall 1975), pp. 613-35. EJ 135 378.

Jackson provides us with our only critical review of the research on grade retention. His review rests on a survey of all the literature through mid-1973 and reports his intensive examination of the forty-four available original research studies. He unfortunately does not give the details of any of the studies and proves most helpful for his analysis of the problems of the research, which is generally poor in quality and provides only mixed results.

The research on grade retention has made use of three basic analytical designs, Jackson reports. The first of these designs compares groups of students regularly promoted and retained under normal school policy. Although studies of this kind attempt to match students according to such characteristics as mental age, test scores, and socioeconomic status, their basic design remains flawed and biased in favor of promotion. The fact of promotion indicates that the promoted students are experiencing less difficulty than their retained counterparts.

The second basic design compares the before and after conditions of nonpromoted students. This design is biased toward retention, since it does not control for any factors other than the retention itself that could influence student improvement. The third basic design compares groups of problem students experimentally assigned to either promotion or retention. It alone is sound.

Studies of the first design have tended to support promotion, and studies of the second design have tended to support retention. We cannot know to what extent their results reflect reality or their inherent biases. Only three dated studies have used the third design, and they show no dramatic pattern of results. Further research of a much higher quality than that of the past is necessary.

What then can we learn from this problematic research? The evidence, Jackson concludes, may allow no firm decision in favor of either retention or promotion, but it does hold significance for policy decisions. The studies offer "no reliable body of evidence to indicate that grade retention is more beneficial than grade promotion for students with serious academic or adjustment difficulties." Educators who fail students, Jackson warns, "*do so without valid research evidence*" that such action will prove more helpful than promotion to the next grade.

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5 **Koons, Clair L.** "Nonpromotion: A Dead-End Road." *Phi Delta Kappan*, 58, 9 (May 1977), pp. 701-2. EJ 160 460.

Koons reacts heatedly to Owen and Ranick's (see number 6) advocacy of the strict student promotion policy of the Greensville (Virginia) County Schools. The research, he argues, consistently reveals the futility of such a "commonsense" policy and points the other way. Greensville has set out on a dead-end road.

Koons cites research showing that regularly promoted low-achievers do better than similarly troubled students who are retained. Some students may possibly benefit from retention, but for every one who does "there are two or more who are not helped or who may actually regress following nonpromotion."

Owen and Ranick claim that age-based promotion is more damaging than working at the same material until it is mastered. But their claim is based on fallacy, according to Koons. They falsely assume that low-achievers "who are promoted with their peers cannot be given work at a level at which they can succeed."

Age-based promotion is not the malignancy of our schools. If there is one, it is instead one of students "chafing against rigid, harsh standards that tend to degrade them." Making students fit the schools, as Greensville asks, will not solve the problem. We must make the schools fit the students.

Koons also questions the positive results of the Greensville program and offers four possible reasons why its results run counter to the research. First, the results may only indicate the presence of the Hawthorne Effect. They may derive from enthusiasm for the policy change, rather than from the policy itself. Second, the district's higher test results do not necessarily reflect improvement by its low-achievers. A past study has shown that a strict promotion policy can improve overall achievement while decreasing that of low-achievers. Third, the test results may reflect only students' more serious attention to test taking. And fourth, the higher achievement may depend on teachers teaching to the test.

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6 **Owen, Samuel A.**, and **Ranick, Deborah L.** "The Greensville Program: A Commonsense Approach to Basics." *Phi Delta Kappan*, 58, 7 (March 1977), pp. 531-33, 539. EJ 153 640.

"Age-based promotion has become a malignancy in our public schools," Owen and Ranick charge, "and its removal requires radical surgery." Our schools have been guilty for years of pushing poorly prepared students up the educational ladder and then cynically expecting them to succeed with more advanced work. Such a practice is clearly more damaging than retention and an injustice to students, for it denies them the opportunity to master needed skills. It also permits schools to deny their responsibility for seeing that all students do learn.

The new program of the Greensville County Schools, Virginia, is

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an instance of this radical surgery. Its strict promotion standards refuse social promotion: no student is to be promoted until mastering the skills of his or her grade level. Student evaluations are based entirely on the mastery of skills, and standardized test scores play an important role in evaluation. New proficiency-based graduation requirements accompany the promotion standards.

Greensville's surgery, the authors maintain, has been accomplished without impairing the "vital elements of the instructional program." The schools seek "to bring each pupil up to established standards," and they accordingly attend to the diagnosis of students' individual strengths and weaknesses, provide intensive instruction to meet the needs of slower students, and create an atmosphere of success. Retained students are not placed in the same classrooms with newly promoted students, but are instead grouped with other students of their age. Partial promotions are available for students who achieve most of the skills of their grade. The schools have also greatly expanded their learning opportunities at the secondary level.

The authors report the program an unqualified success. Achievement test scores and measured IQs have risen, the dropout rate and number of retentions have fallen, and students, teachers, and the community have responded with satisfaction.

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7 **Pipho, Chris,** guest editor. "Minimum Competency Testing." *Phi Delta Kappan,* 59, 9 (May 1978), entire issue.

While education has traditionally focused its attention on materials and processes, competency-based education places new emphasis on learning goals and their evaluation. Precisely defined goals lie at its heart and govern instruction, student evaluation, and student advancement and graduation. Its demand for student mastery of prescribed goals stands to ensure minimum student competence and presents a clear "no" to the practice of social promotion. Fed by a strong concern for more efficient and accountable education, competency-based education and its step-child, minimal competency testing, have rapidly spread throughout the country.

Pipho introduces this special issue of *Phi Delta Kappan* with an assessment of the present status of the minimal competency testing movement. It has now arrived in some form in all states, he reports. Some thirty-three states have mandated competency standards for elementary and secondary students and the remaining states have legislation pending or studies in progress.

Fifteen articles explore the movement and its contradictions on the levels of theory, policy, and district practice and together provide a rich and balanced introduction. No article focuses on social promotion and retention alone, but the issue receives constant attention.

The discussion of social promotion and retention may be illustrated by the views of Gary Hart and Gordon Cawelti. Hart, in his review of the California competency legislation which he authored, supports a return to stricter standards. Our present lack of standards, he believes, has proved a great disservice to students and the schools: "without standards and the accountability provided by a sanction, students become contemptuous, teachers become demoralized, and schools increasingly lose credibility with taxpayers."

Cawelti, in a rebuttal to a proposal for national competency testing, points to the research to argue the harm and waste of grade retention. Critics may be right in noting that teachers promote low-achieving students, he states, but the teachers know what they are doing.

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8 **Reiter, Robert G.** *The Promotion/Retention Dilemma: What Research Tells Us. Report No. 7416.* Philadelphia: Office of Research and Evaluation, Philadelphia School District, 1973. 23 pages. ED 099 412.

Reiter provides less of a review of the research than a summary of its findings. He gives us almost no discussion of individual studies and no analysis of the research itself. His conclusions may thus be suspect, but his discussion of school policy is helpful.

Recent studies, he judges, confirm the conclusions of an earlier review of the research done by the Philadelphia schools. Grade retention appears futile: it ensures neither more achievement nor better social and emotional adjustment than does social promotion. It usually damages student motivation. Its damaging effects appear to be long-term and self-perpetuating. It also does not help schools maintain high standards of achievement.

But an automatic promotion policy—the opposite extreme—causes serious problems as well and fails to resolve the problems of poor achievement and adjustment. In terms of its impact on students, it can only be judged "somewhat *less unsatisfactory*" than its opposite.

The best response to the problem, Reiter advises, is an approach that avoids both extremes and respects students' individual differences. If schools seek to meet individual needs and draw forth each student's maximum learning, the key question to be asked changes from "Should academically deficient pupils be promoted or retained?" to "How can the most favorable learning situation be provided *for this pupil?*" More important than a set policy and administrative convenience are the student's individual needs and the specific context or atmosphere in which promotional decisions are applied.

Schools are seeking the ideal of no failure through such approaches as individualized instruction and nongraded programs, but the powerful impact of extraschool factors will probably prevent their realization of the ideal. Schools may then have to settle in practice for a policy that favors social promotion in general but permits occasional purposeful retention in the primary grades.

9 **Walker, William E.** "The Slow-Progress Student in Graded and Nongraded Programs." *Peabody Journal of Education*, 50, 3 (April 1973), pp. 191-210. EJ 073 367

The use of nonpromotion has declined sharply during the past sixty years, but most schools still make some use of it, despite the continued evidence pointing out its problems. Walker judges this present use to be too much and contributes this review of research on nonpromotion and nongraded programs to the continuing debate. His review is the most detailed and comprehensive of the research reviews, though its critical analysis of the research itself is limited. Sometimes its readings are at odds with Jackson's.

The evidence, Walker demonstrates, fails to support a policy of forced nonpromotion. Students in general do not learn more when repeating a grade and often learn less, and the problems of retention appear to be long-term, for retained students never achieve up to par throughout their schooling. Poor self-concept, linked with low achievement, appears to be aggravated by retention. Nonpromotion also seems to foster negative attitudes toward school.

The nongraded, continuous progress program seems an appropriate response to the problems of slow-achieving students, since it removes the conflict between the graded structure of schools and students' individual differences. Research on the benefits of nongraded programs, however, has been inconclusive and often poorly designed. If we are to judge the benefits of such programs, Walker concludes, we will need more faithful implementation of the nongraded theoretical model and more comprehensive evaluation.

10 "When Students Can't Make the Grade, Do Your Schools Pass Them Anyway?" *Updating School Board Policies*, 8, 4 (April 1977), pp. 1-2, 4-5. EJ 157 068

This brief review raises the issues of social promotion and grade retention through a survey of administrators' judgments and district policies.

In the past, the review states, schools were content to fail problem students and push them out of school, but in the sixties, pressure for greater equality led schools to take on the responsibility for getting all students through. In the process, schools were forced to lower their standards. Now we are experiencing a turn back to the right: educators are crying out against social promotion and graduation, and more and more schools, many under state mandate, are adopting the strict standards provided by minimal competency testing and competency-based education. This new turn holds the promise to "revolutionize" public education.

Some 90 percent of districts still practice social promotion. Among the reasons given are that some students cannot keep pace, no matter what schools do, and that the trauma of retention far outweighs its potential benefits for most students. One district's promotion policy permits irregular promotion when older students are working to capacity or experiencing social or emotional problems and when parents refuse special placement for students incapable of meeting standards.

Among the new critics is Samuel Owen of the Greensville County Schools, Virginia. For Owen, social promotion harms more than retention: it lets students get farther and farther behind until they are pushed out of school. It lessens the motivation of all students. And it also makes it difficult for schools to maintain high standards.

At the heart of any promotion policy, the review concludes, is a basic belief in students' ability to learn. Schools can choose either to "embrace the faith that schools can find the key to help all children learn" (and uphold strict promotion policies) or "conclude that some children cannot be reached and accept the consequences" (and continue social promotion).

This issue of *Updating School Board Policies* also contains a discussion of Greensville's promotion policies.